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Unnatural Disaster: Social Impacts and Policy Choices after Katrina

John R. Logan

Early media reports about the wind damage and flooding caused by Hurricane Katrina have been focused on New Orleans, and especially on the people who had been unable to escape the city before it flooded. Images of poor and predominantly black people crowded into the Superdome and Convention Center created indelible impressions about who was affected most strongly. We now know that most residents had evacuated safely and that even some mostly white and predominantly middle class neighborhoods were decimated by the flooding. And yet the initial impression is true: Katrina disproportionately affected poor, black neighborhoods. Because these are the residents with the least market resources, this means that policy choices affecting who can return, to which neighborhoods, and with what forms of public and private assistance, will greatly affect the future character of the city.

At this writing, more than a year after the hurricane, what stands out is the failure to formulate a coherent policy. But what is visible so far is disturbing. It now appears that the recovery of New Orleans will be unusually slow. A reliable estimate of the city's population prepared by the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals (2006) estimated a total of 201,000 persons, far less than half the 494,000 counted by Census 2000. The white population in the period June-October was about two thirds of its former size, while the black population was down by nearly three quarters. Several questions will be addressed here to understand this result and interpret its future implications: 1. who was displaced by Katrina, 2. how does the pattern of displacement affect people's chances of returning, 3. how are public policy decisions affecting the recovery process, and 4. what do shifts in local political influence portend for the future?

Displacement from New Orleans

The best information about displacement, including the neighborhood location and social composition of affected people, is based on counts of the population living in

areas that were flooded. My estimate is that nearly 650,000 persons lived in heavily damaged areas in the New Orleans metropolitan region and Mississippi Coast (Logan 2006a). More than half of these, 354,000, lived in the city proper, Orleans Parish (for a similar conclusion, see the report by the Congressional Research Service: Gabe et al 2005).

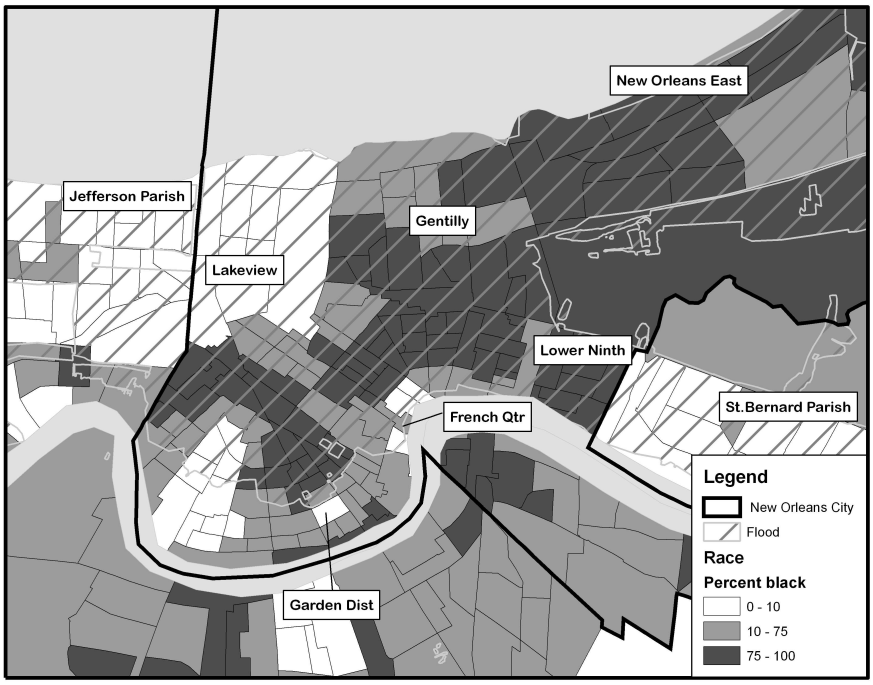

Figure 1: Extent of flood damage from Katrina and racial composition of census tracts in New Orleans.

Figure 1 shows flooded and non-flooded areas of Orleans Parish along with the racial composition (per cent black) of Census tracts. This map shows that the undamaged areas of the city were mainly in two areas. One is just north of the Mississippi River in a zone extending westward from downtown. The other is across the river on the West Bank, in a district known as Algiers. The map shows that some predominantly white neighborhoods in the northwest part of the city were entirely flooded. However almost all of the neighborhoods that were in the range of 75 per cent to 100 per cent black at the time of Census 2000 were flooded. I estimate that

about 265,000 of the city's Census 2000 black population of 325,000 lived in flooded zones. This compares to about 68,000 of 129,000 non-blacks.

Separate analyses demonstrate that damaged areas were also disproportionately composed of renters and lower income residents. However it is the division by race that stands out most strongly, because the most damaged black neighborhoods had varying class composition, ranging from predominantly middle class New Orleans East to the much less affluent Lower Ninth Ward, to neighborhoods with public housing projects where a majority of residents were below the poverty line.

Discussions of the racially differential impact of Katrina have often emphasized the Lower Ninth Ward (where many homes were entirely demolished by the breach in the levee of the Industrial Canal) and New Orleans East. Most neighborhoods in these planning districts were more than 85 per cent black, and most residences were damaged. A majority of residents of both of these planning districts were homeowners, though there were clear class distinctions between the two areas. More than a third of Lower Ninth Ward residents were below the poverty line, and nearly 14 per cent were unemployed. New Orleans East had a considerably larger middle class component, though it was not among the city's most affluent sections.

Many of the most segregated neighborhoods with the highest poverty rates are those identified as »projects« a reference to the prominence of public housing within their borders. The project neighborhoods typically had poverty rates in the range of 60–80 per cent of the population, unemployment is above 20 per cent, they were all predominantly black (with African Americans accounting for 90 per cent or more of their residents), and 80 per cent or more of residents were renters. There are six such neighborhoods in New Orleans (though there are concentrations of public housing or Section 8 housing in other parts of the city). In five of them with a combined 2000 population of over 15,000 persons (Calliope, Iberville, St. Bernard Area, Desire, and Florida) the entire territory was damaged.

At the other end of the class spectrum are a number of more advantaged neighborhoods with poverty rates below 10 per cent or unemployment rates below 5 per cent. In the most heavily impacted planning districts, only a few neighborhoods meet either criterion. These include the Lake-Terrace/Lake Oaks neighborhood in Gentilly and the Read Boulevard East neighborhood in New Orleans East. Most such neighborhoods are in the Lakeview Planning District, which is an area with a small black population, mostly homeowners, and very low rates of poverty and unemployment. Here only the Lakeshore/Lake Vista neighborhood, adjacent to Lake Pontchartrain, was partly spared.

Few residents in the French Quarter, a predominantly white neighborhood with a poverty rate of about 11 per cent and unemployment below 5 per cent, lived in tracts that were flooded. Among other neighborhoods with a national reputation for affluence, the Garden District neighborhood was not flooded and only 40 per cent

of the Audubon/University neighborhood (home of Tulane University and Loyola University) was damaged.

Where people went

The Census data represent the numbers of persons who were at greatest risk of being displaced for more than a few weeks. What is known about the actual long-term displacement of population? Evidence is given here from three different sources. Each source has its own limitations, but taken together these sources offer a consistent picture: the majority of the city's population is still living elsewhere, of these the largest share is living outside the state, and black residents (especially poor black residents) are disproportionately found at the greatest distance from their prior homes.

One source is postal change of address data in the post-Katrina period, tabulated by the U.S. Postal Service (Russell 2006). These data identify the original pre-Katrina 3-digit zip code (origin) and current 3-digit zip code (destination) of households that filed changes of address. At the end of March 2006 more than 160,000 households were relocated from their original address in Orleans Parish. Of these, about 17,000 were at a new address within Orleans Parish. About 21,000 were elsewhere in the metropolitan region, plus 15,000 in Baton Rouge, and 12,000 in other parts of Louisiana. Close to two-thirds were out-of-state, most prominently in Texas (52,000). The most common out-of-state destinations were Houston (27,000), Dallas (14,000), and Atlanta (8,000).

Another source is FEMA's tally of the reported addresses of area residents who had applied for assistance. This information was prepared in mid-February 2006 and made available in the federal court case that challenged election procedures (Wallace v. Blanco). An astounding total of nearly 400,000 persons initially living in Orleans Parish had applied for assistance. Of these, 154,000 were living within Louisiana, including a number of persons who had suffered relatively minor damage and returned to their original homes. But over 100,000 reported addresses in Texas and an even larger number were living in other states. These numbers reinforce the conclusion above about the significance of displacement outside of Louisiana, especially to Texas.

The impacts of displacement depend not only on its volume but also its location – and the furthest away turn out to be African Americans, especially those with the lowest incomes. The only public source of information about the racial composition and income levels of displaced persons is the Current Population Survey (CPS), conducted by the U.S. Department of Commerce. CPS is collected monthly for a

national sample of 60,000 households. It is designed to be representative of the civilian non-institutional population age 16 and above. Beginning in November 2005 CPS included a question to identify persons who were evacuated as a result of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Its principal limitations are its relatively small sample size and its exclusion of persons living in shelters, hotels, or other forms of group quarters. The sample weights provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics allow the sample to be used to produce population estimates, and I have used the sample data from December 2005 to evaluate the racial composition and income levels of displaced persons (Logan 2006b). I selected only persons whose original pre-Katrina residence was in the State of Louisiana. I focused on non-Hispanic whites and non-Hispanic blacks. The number of evacuees identified as Hispanic, Asian, or other race is too small to permit analysis.

In December 2005, evacuees identified in CPS-sampled households represented about 1.1 million persons aged 16 and over who had evacuated from where they were living in August. Just over half of these persons had returned to the home from which they had evacuated. According to this source, more than 400,000 whites were evacuated, of whom 67 per cent had returned home. Among blacks, more than 200,000 were evacuated, of whom less than 40 per cent had returned home. Of those who were still displaced, nearly two-thirds of whites were in Louisiana, while three-quarters of blacks were out of state.

It is also relevant to compare the income levels of white and black evacuees. White evacuees had similar income levels regardless of their current location, with a median just under 50,000 US Dollars and less than 15 per cent in households with income under 20,000 US Dollars. Black evacuees who had returned home had somewhat lower incomes than whites. Blacks who remained displaced had much lower incomes, with a median of under 15,000 US Dollars and more than 60 per cent below 20,000 US Dollars. It is clear, therefore, that blacks – because they were further away and had fewer personal resources – faced great obstacles to their return to New Orleans.

Policy choices

The sheer number of people who lived in heavily damaged areas is a reminder of the scale of Katrina's impact. Because the storm hit large numbers of people of every race and class, it is not surprising that initial public support for policies to assist these people also cut across race and class lines. However there was also a substantial disproportionate impact on African Americans and people with fewer resources. These disparities stem from within the City of New Orleans itself, and

more specifically from vulnerability to flooding. This is a pattern with deep roots, and although Katrina caused the most extensive flooding in memory, prior studies by historians (such as Colten 2005) have demonstrated that both high ground and public investments in drainage and pumping systems consistently worked to the advantage of certain neighborhoods in past storms.

There are major variations across the region that are likely to affect the process of recovery. Damage was extensive on the Mississippi Coast, and the area's largest single source of employment – casino gambling – was knocked out of operation. In comparison to New Orleans, however, the number of people living in areas of moderate or greater damage was small, only about 50,000. And also in contrast to New Orleans, only a small share of these people were black and a majority were homeowners. It is difficult to assess the importance of race in recovery policy in Mississippi, but in a politically conservative state it could make a big difference that white homeowners constitute the bulk of claimants for state assistance. Further, these people are easier to serve for several reasons.

1. First, they are identifiable and – because they retain an ownership interest in their properties – they should prove easier for authorities to contact.
2. Second, since much of the damage wrought by Katrina in this area was by wind and rain damage, standard homeowner policies offer substantial private sector coverage of damage losses. For those with uninsured flood damage, Mississippi state government expects federal aid to be sufficient to fund payments of 150,000 US Dollars to individual homeowners.
3. Third, the low density of housing in this area means that typically even when one's home was uninhabitable, there was space for a trailer in the driveway. Since in addition the loss of electrical power was relatively short-term in Mississippi, and basic public services could be restored within a reasonable time, homeowners in this region more readily met the requirements for a FEMA-provided trailer – space and confirmed utility hookups.

In contrast, consider the situation in New Orleans. Six months after Katrina, observers were beginning to see signs of progress (Russell 2006b). But more than half the persons in damaged areas were renters, unlikely to be protected in any way by property insurance, and 30 per cent fell below the poverty line and were therefore unlikely to have their own funds to return to the city. By the end of 2005, power was still unavailable much of the city, and actual connections to electric power required residents to present evidence of inspection by a licensed electrician before power would be restored to an individual home. The utility company (a subsidiary of the Entergy Corporation) had filed for bankruptcy protection in September. Large areas of the city remain vacant even at the beginning of 2007. Though most debris has been removed and many homes have been gutted, reconstruction work

had not begun on most homes. Basic public services had not been restored in many neighborhoods. For example, only 54 public schools reopened in fall 2006 (compared to 128 before Katrina). As shown in Figure 2, these schools were concentrated in high-ground neighborhoods close to the Mississippi River, with almost none in New Orleans East, the Lower Ninth Ward, Gentilly, and Lakeview.

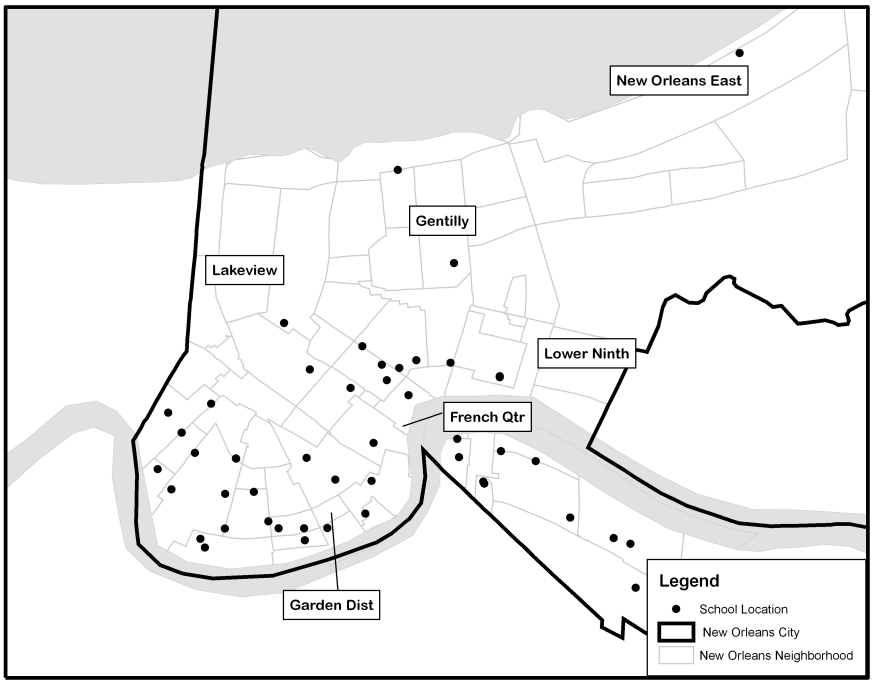

Figure 2: Location of public schools reopened in New Orleans for Fall 2006.

Among the key policy choices confronted by the city, three stand out as especially significant (more generally see Popkin, Turner and Burt 2006; Nossiter 2006). These are the questions of how to allocate housing assistance funds to residents, how to restructure public housing, and where to concentrate support for neighborhood rebuilding. Initial steps favor people and neighborhoods that have more market resources and do little to support the most disadvantaged.

Housing assistance

The principal public source of funding for housing reconstruction is the federal government, with 10.4 billion US Dollars in Community Development Block Grant support authorized in June 2006 for Louisiana (Maggi 2006). The state's plan for using these funds is called The Road Home (Louisiana Office of Community Development 2006). It targets about 8 billion US Dollars for assistance to homeowners. Only 1.5 billion US Dollars is allocated to a program to redevelop rental housing.

According to estimates by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2006a) there were a total of almost 100,000 housing units in New Orleans that suffered »major or severe« damage or were destroyed. Of these 52 per cent were owner-occupied and 48 per cent occupied by renters. By this measure alone, the policy of allocating most funds to homeowners is not proportionate to the damage. Given that rents have risen by as much as 30–40 per cent and the vacancy rate for rental housing is near zero (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2006b), it seems clear that a more focused effort to build or rehabilitate rental housing would be needed in order to allow many rental households to return to the city.

Public housing

A special category of housing is public housing controlled by the Housing Authority of New Orleans. Prior to Katrina, there were about 8,000 units though due to poor maintenance (and consistent with a general plan of reducing this segment of the housing stock) only 5,100 were occupied at the time of Katrina. As was also true nationally, efforts were underway to restructure the system by demolishing existing units and replacing them with new mixed-income developments. This had already been done with one complex, the St. Thomas Project in the Central City/Garden District, which was demolished in 2002 and replaced by a Wal-Mart and new predominantly market-rate condominiums. Originally built for 1,500 low-income families, the new development so far accommodates only 200. Most public housing complexes were sealed after the hurricane (with metal barriers bolted over the doorways) to prevent tenants from returning. Confirming speculation during the preceding year, including comments by public officials that only »people who are willing to work« should be allowed to return to public housing, specific plans were announced in June 2006 by HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson to demolish 5000 more units (Saulny 2006). The St. Bernard, C. J. Peete, B. W. Cooper and Lafitte

housing developments would be entirely removed. They would be replaced by mixed-income developments following the St. Thomas model.

At the same time, HUD increased by 35 per cent the amount that it would pay as the »fair market rent« through housing vouchers. If there were vacancies at this rate ($976 for a two-bedroom unit as of October 2006), a system of housing vouchers for low and moderate income people could be evaluated as a reasonable alternative to public housing. But in the context of a zero-vacancy rental market at any price, the decision to press ahead with public housing demolition means that few displaced low-income families will have any opportunity to live in New Orleans in the future.

Neighborhood triage

Although public officials have assiduously avoided saying so, there is a high probability that redevelopment in some neighborhoods will be discouraged by public policy. If this is not done by an overt designation of areas as off-limits for building permits, the same outcome may be achieved passively by choosing not to make the public investments that are required for livable communities. These include repair of infrastructure damage and reopening of facilities such as schools and police and fire stations.

The notion of neighborhood triage was implicit in the proposals made by the Bring Back New Orleans Commission (2006) in the public report of its Urban Planning Committee in January 2006. Some zones of the city were designated as »immediate opportunity areas« where the city should identify vacant and underutilized property for new construction, expedite permits for repairs and construction of new housing, provide/support community and cultural facilities and services, assist educational/health institutions to address immediate needs, and begin repair/reconstruction using current rules and regulations. Others were proposed to be »neighborhood planning areas,« where the city should conduct a neighborhood planning process to determine the appropriate future. In these areas, the city was advised not to issue any permits to build or rebuild.

Although this report was not adopted, and indeed was widely criticized, it sets forth the key planning question: given that there are insufficient public resources to support fully the rebuilding of all neighborhoods, by what criteria should choices among neighborhoods be made? Mayor Nagin has repeatedly suggested one approach, to let the decisions be guided by residents who »vote with their feet« to return. Neighborhoods where a will to recover is demonstrated by individual investments and collective action should be supported; in other areas, individuals should

be counseled against trying to rebuild. This is essentially a proposal to let the market decide the future of the city.

For many of the same reasons that rebuilding will be facilitated on the Mississippi Coast, the white residents of the City of New Orleans are more likely than black residents to be able to return to their neighborhoods, even if the neighborhood is reopened. Whites are more likely to be homeowners (55 per cent compared to 42 per cent among African American households), but more important, they are much more likely to have the personal resources to reinvest in their homes or to find a new residence in a difficult housing market. In the pre-Katrina black population, 35 per cent were below the poverty line and the median household income was only 25,000 US Dollars. Among whites, only 11 per cent were poor and the median income was more than twice as high – 61,000 US Dollars. Therefore even among homeowners, blacks are less likely to have the means to rebuild than are whites.

In conjunction with public support for homeowners over tenants and the plan to demolish most public housing, market-based policies point toward a future in which New Orleans – though it may be much smaller than before – will also have a smaller share of black residents, tenants, and poor and working class families. To the extent that the city's labor force continues to require a certain share of persons with low skills and low wages, which is typical of a tourist economy, this means that these workers will mostly live elsewhere.

The future in the balance: shifting electoral politics

Although there appears to be an emerging direction in local recovery policy, final decisions have not been made. The provisions of Louisiana's Road to Recovery and the demolition of public housing are being contested in court, and the election of Democratic majorities in the U.S. House and Senate may have some influence on how federal resources will be used. There is also a formal neighborhood planning process put in place in fall 2006, supported by a large grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, through which neighborhood organizations have been encouraged to make their voices heard. Another factor that may make a difference is the shifting constituencies in local politics.

There has been a potential for political coalitions that cut across the racial and class divisions that have helped structure city politics over the decades. Residents of such very different neighborhoods as Lakeview and the Lower Ninth Ward have a shared interest in short-term assistance programs such as subsidies for temporary housing outside the city. Yet variations across neighborhoods – and across race and

class – are likely to support the emergence of a sense of conflicting interests. In December 2005 conflict took the form of opposition to proposals to locate FEMA trailers in public spaces within neighborhoods that sustained less damage. In this case the interests of advantaged neighborhoods (advantaged by protection from flooding and by having residents in place to express their views) were in conflict with the interests of absent residents who have no place to return. Not surprisingly the City Council gave its members veto power over new trailer parks in the areas that they represent.

The mayoral election in spring 2006 offers evidence that conflicting interests are likely to overcome consensus (Logan 2006b), and it is not obvious whose interests will predominate. On the one hand, there was a substantial change in the composition of the electorate, reflecting the disproportionate displacement of lower income black voters. On the other, there was a surprising shift in the source of Mayor Nagin's electoral support that could make him more responsive to that same constituency.

The first indicator of change is turnout. In the previous municipal election (2002), when the current Mayor, Ray Nagin, defeated Richard Pennington, there was a modest turnout of 130,000 voters (out of a total pool of registered voters that has remained close to 300,000 for the last several years). In the more recent Presidential election of 2004, when few local positions were at stake but there was considerable interest in the contest between President George Bush and challenger John Kerry, the turnout was over 197,000. Compared to either standard, participation in 2006 was depressed, with a total of under 115,000 votes cast.

Of course a lower turnout was inevitable. More interesting is how turnout varied across neighborhoods. From the perspective of future urban policy, neighborhoods with the highest electoral participation have likely strengthened their hands in the battles over public investment and development plannings that are sure to be a major feature of local politics in the next several years. Figure 3 displays turnout levels in 2006 as a proportion of the 2002 level. This map can be compared to the map of racial composition and flood damage presented above.

The neighborhoods with the largest declines in turnout are in the Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans East, and parts of Mid-City and Bywater. These are all predominantly black neighborhoods, but they have widely varying class composition. In Mid-City and Bywater it is especially the public housing projects whose former residents have been barred from returning to the city up to now. The Lower Ninth Ward is a mixed income area with many working class homeowners. These are both areas where the loss of public infrastructure and government restrictions on entry have seriously delayed recovery efforts. New Orleans East, in contrast, has been an important base for the black middle class. All these areas suffered close to 100 per cent flooding, and displacement is the most obvious explanation for low turnout.

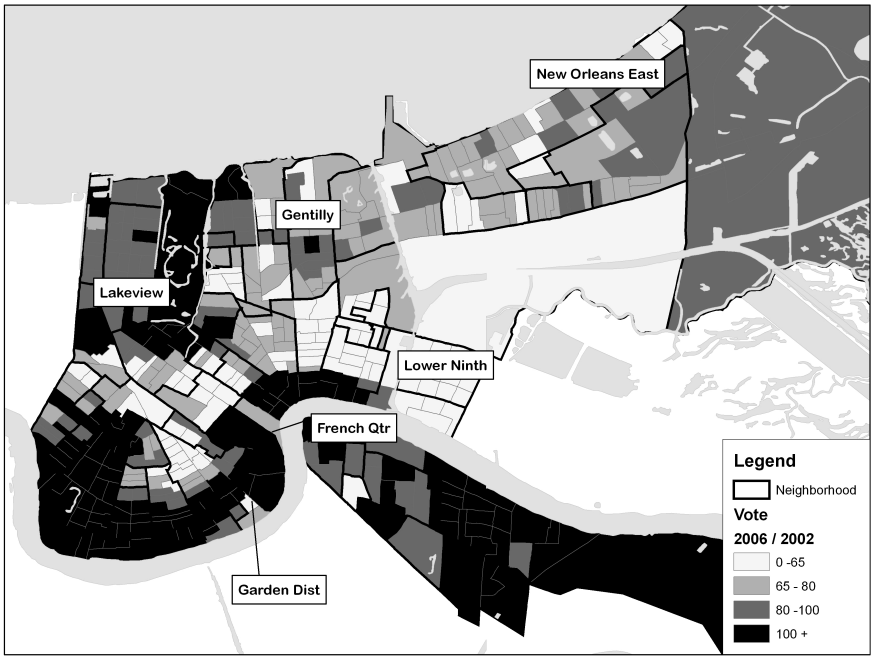

Figure 3: Turnout in the mayoral primary election in New Orleans in 2006 in relation to turnout in 2002.

Among white neighborhoods there is generally a positive correlation between voter turnout and extent of flood damage. For example, the Uptown/Carrollton and Central City/Garden District include some neighborhoods with very little flood damage and others that were hard hit. Neighborhoods with no flooding like Uptown and Garden District had considerably higher participation than in 2002, while those with more damage like Broadmoor and Milan suffered a loss. But there are two other significant patterns to point out:

1. Several planning districts show little impact of Katrina. The French Quarter and Central Business District actually had higher turnout than in 2002, as did New Aurora and Algiers on the West Bank. These are among the areas of the city with the least flood damage. The surprise here is how much participation declined in comparison to the 2004 Presidential election, with a fall of 25-30 per cent that seems unlikely to be due to population loss. In what may have been the most important election in the history of the city, why was turnout in these areas no more than the usual local standard? There may be evidence here of forces beyond dis-

placement, evidence of surprising apathy, alienation and disaffection from the political process by the residents of these relatively advantaged communities.

2. On the other hand, despite its devastation Lakeview shows an exceptional turnout. The number of Lakeview voters was nearly (94 per cent) as high in 2006 as in 2002. Even more, there are only modest variations within the district between Lake Shore/Lake Vista, which was only partly flooded, and areas like Navarre that were heavily damaged. Lakeview's participation may have been influenced by a special tax measure on the ballot that would increase property taxes in this district for the purpose of improved policing. A greater factor probably was extensive voter mobilization by local civic groups. Lakeview is known to have a strong civic association that has built upon the many smaller neighborhood associations that used to operate in the area, and in this election it translated its affluence and high levels of homeownership into political clout.

Another planning district with a relatively high turnout despite considerable damage is Gentilly, especially the racially mixed neighborhoods of Fillmore (94 per cent as high as 2002) and Gentilly Terrace (88 per cent as high).

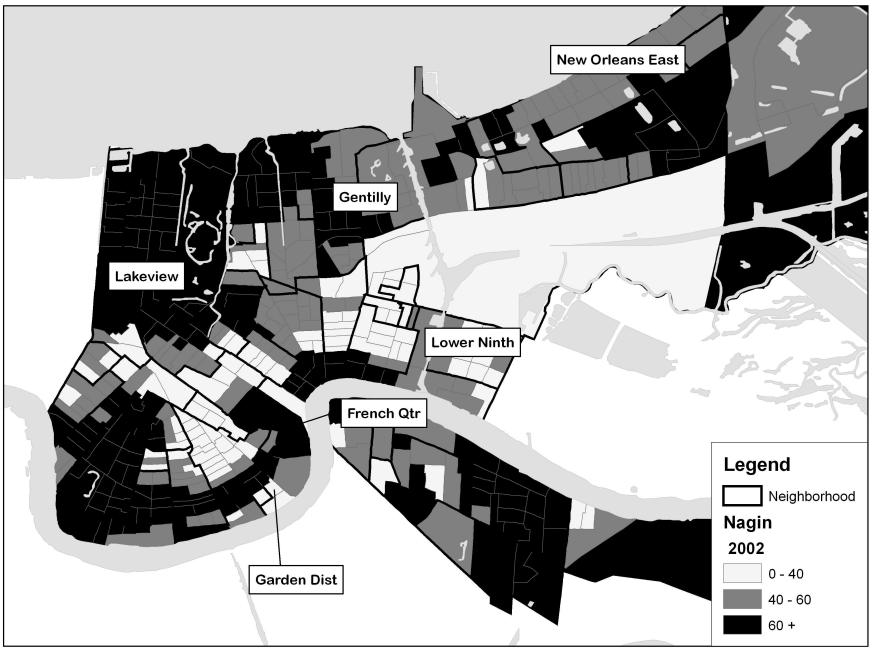

Figure 4: Level of support for Ray Nagin in the mayoral election in New Orleans in 2002.

Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the shift with maps showing the extent of support for Nagin in his first race in 2002 and in the 2006 primary by precinct. Comparing these maps to the map of racial composition presented above, in 2002 it is clear that Nagin ran strongest in the neighborhoods with smaller black populations. Reports from the period suggested that in fact his election depended on support from white neighborhoods (and financial backing from people described as the »Uptown white establishment«).

Although Hurricane Katrina reshaped the political map of the city by suppressing the vote in the poorest and blackest neighborhoods, the dynamics of the mayoral campaign also represent a more remarkable shift in the composition of support for the winning candidate, Mayor Ray Nagin. Having been elected in 2002 on the basis of his strong showing in white and more affluent neighborhoods, the Mayor was re-elected with his main edge among neighborhoods with predominantly black and low to middle income residents.

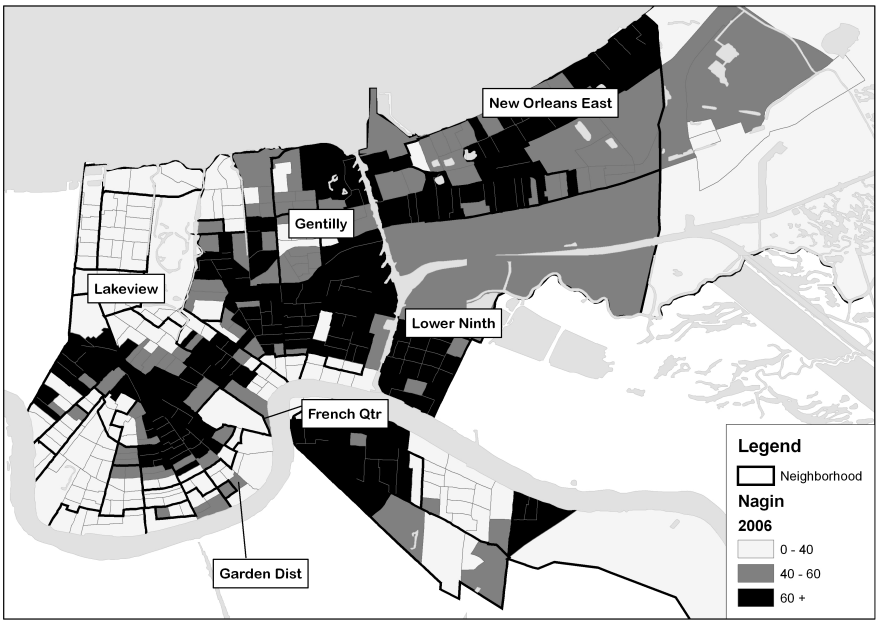

Figure 5: Level of support for Ray Nagin in the mayoral primary election in New Orleans in 2006.

In a surprising remaking of the electoral map, Nagin's support in 2006 shifted almost 180 degrees – neighborhoods that had supported him now supported his opponents, and areas where he had found the least votes now constituted his core constituency. The planning districts with the highest levels of support for Mayor Nagin are the Lower Ninth Ward (83 per cent in 2006 compared to only 40 per cent in 2002) and New Orleans East (71 per cent, up from 55 per cent). The individual neighborhoods with the highest shares of Nagin votes are Project neighborhoods: above 90 per cent in Calliope Project, Desire Project, and Fischer Project, all areas where he previously received at most a third of votes.

In contrast, Nagin lost heavily in predominantly white areas. In the Garden District, for example, which is only 2 per cent black, he had gained 85 per cent of the votes in 2002 but only 22 per cent in 2006. Lakeview, also 2 per cent black, voted overwhelmingly for Nagin in 2002 (87 per cent) but against him in 2006 (22 per cent).

The new political geography of the city certainly will be a factor as policy decisions are made in the coming months and years. Where will schools reopen, where will policing and other public services be brought back on line soonest, where will rebuilding be encouraged by city officials and what neighborhoods will have a lower priority? Areas like the Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans East, and the less affluent and predominantly black sections of Bywater and Mid-City have experienced sharp declines in their participation in the political process. In contrast, Lakeview nearly matched its 2002 vote total despite dislocation of most of its residents, and areas like Algiers, Uptown-Carrollton, the French Quarter, and Garden District see their political influence on the rise in this respect.

But there is also a countervailing force, an unexpected consolidation of voting patterns along racial lines in which a politically conservative black mayor turned successfully to a black and low income constituency that previously had denied him their support. This outcome potentially diminishes the political losses that this part of the electorate, and the neighborhoods where they are concentrated, seemed sure to suffer. Much now depends on how well groups play their cards and what role the backroom players (the investors and real estate entrepreneurs who eventually once again supported Mayor Nagin's campaign war chest) have in the process. Support from areas like the Projects, Lower Ninth Ward, and New Orleans East was critical, but their voices will have to be heard from a distance. White Republican neighborhoods backed the losing candidate, but the 20 per cent or more of their votes that went to Nagin were indispensable to his victory. This is a situation where a public official will face conflicting pressures, but may also find considerable room to maneuver and provide leadership for a city that has put key decisions on hold for too long.

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